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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 007597

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SUBJECT: THE BAATH PARTY IN JORDAN: SHORT ON FUNDS AND MEMBERS

REF: AMMAN 6240

Classified By: CDA Daniel Rubinstein for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Once a potent force in Jordanian politics, the Baath party in Jordan (as opposed to traditional Baathist ideology) is widely viewed as irrelevant. The main Baathist party, discredited by close identification with Saddam Hussein, is short on both cash and membership. The GOJ can be expected to stop any serious attempt to use the Baathist parties in Jordan as a platform to fund or coordinate cross-border activities. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) BACKGROUND: The Baath Party in Jordan was first established in 1948. Its core support came from educated citizens in urban areas, including cities in the then-Jordanian controlled West Bank. Adhering to a pan-Arab doctrine of secular socialism, the party quickly grew in popularity. It joined an alliance of nationalist-leftist parties that dominated parliament after the 1956 elections. However, like other parties (though not the Muslim Brotherhood), it was officially banned by King Hussein in 1957 after he prevailed in a power struggle with Nasserite Prime Minister Nabulsi. It then continued as an unofficial movement - with many party members actively working underground despite the real threat of imprisonment - riding the wave of Arab nationalism sweeping the region. Baathist ideology peaked locally in the 1960s, with many adherents in Jordanian universities among both faculty and students, but then began to diminish in influence. Local political observers attribute this decline to the loss of the West Bank to Israel in 1967 and, more importantly, disillusionment with the policies of ruling Baathist parties in Syria and Iraq.

¶3. (SBU) After King Hussein legalized political parties in 1992, two separate Baathist parties gained official recognition in Jordan: the Baath Arab Progressive Party which took its cue from Syria, and the Jordan Arab Socialist Baath Party which followed the line from Iraq. Both gained little popular support, according to post contacts, because they were widely seen as apologists for the regimes in Damascus and Baghdad respectively, rather than as true standard bearers for traditional Baathist ideals. Thanks to its links to Iraq, the Jordan Arab Socialist Baath Party was able to garner a limited degree of attention by helping to finance, over the course of a decade, thousands of scholarships for students to study in Iraqi universities. This program came to a sudden end in 2003 with the ouster of Saddam Hussein, and the party was nearly forced into bankruptcy as angry Jordanians demanded that it help finance the return of students sent to Iraq.

¶4. (SBU) In August 2005, the leadership of the Jordan Arab Socialist Baath Party (JASBP) held its first party conference since U.S.-led Coalition military action in Iraq. While party leaders held a press conference afterwards to publicize an alleged letter from Saddam Hussein delivered to a Jordanian contact by the Red Cross, Jordan's press largely ignored the actual party gathering. Post contacts assert this lack of media coverage reflects the fact that the JASBP is widely considered irrelevant in the Jordanian political arena. The JASBP has no members in parliament, and like almost all of Jordan's 30-plus political parties (with the notable exception of the Islamic Action Front), it is very short on resources - its headquarters consists of a shabby apartment - and lacks public credibility. Religious Jordanians, and particularly Islamists, decry its secularism, while East Bank nationalists are wary of its emphasis on pan-Arab unity.

¶5. (C) Some of post's contacts in academic and political punditry circles sometimes describe themselves as "former Baathists," and some claim to profess allegiance to historical Baathist ideas. None of these contacts, however, even thought to join the JASBP as they considered it a propaganda tool for the former Iraqi regime. Dr. Husni Shiyab, a former member of parliament and professor of political science who actively supported the Baath party as a young adult, told poloff that blind allegiance to Saddam Hussein had discredited the JASBP from the start in the eyes of traditional Baathists. As a result, he stated, "there are far more real Baathists outside the party than inside." Shiyab said that the JASBP was trying to increase its popular

appeal by reflecting current trends, including Islamic conservatism (comment: notwithstanding the inherent contradiction). He noted, for example, that the party was stressing "the role of Islam in forming the Arab identity" to counter its secular bent, but to little avail.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: Given its lack of resources and membership, the JASBP is likely incapable of financing or otherwise providing real support for insurgents in Iraq. (For an assessment of the activities and capabilities of Saddam's relatives here in exile, see reftel.) As with other Jordanian political parties, the Baath is prohibited from having formal ties with organizations outside the country or accepting direct foreign funding. The GOJ can be expected to use these and other legal restrictions to shut down attempts by Baathists, or supporters of Saddam Hussein elsewhere, to use Jordanian political parties as a platform to fund or coordinate cross-border activities. END COMMENT.

RUBINSTEIN